

# **SHELTER FROM THE STORM**

## **An Inquiry Into Resources for Battered Women in San Luis Obispo County**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women's shelters are safe havens where women and children can go when conditions in their homes become dangerous and may even be life-threatening. These emergency facilities provide room, board, clothing, and support services, for a limited time, to victims of domestic violence.

Domestic violence covers a multitude of behavior ranging from verbal abuse and intimidation to life-threatening physical assault. Battered women often experience many episodes of abuse before they seek help at a shelter. Any woman can get services from a shelter. Rules for acceptance and participation in the programs are the same for everyone, without regard to race, national origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, or marital status.

### **ORIGIN**

Recent surveys estimate that violence exists in 35% of all domestic relationships. Many cases go unreported because of denial, shame, fear, a reluctance to involve police, and a hesitancy by observers to interfere in the relationships of others. The Grand Jury examined the resources available to victims of domestic violence to discover how these programs are reaching those in need in this county.

### **AUTHORITY**

California Penal Code §933.6 states: "A grand jury may at any time examine the books and records of any nonprofit corporation established by or operated on behalf of a public entity the books and records of which it is authorized by law to examine, and, in addition to any other investigatory powers granted by this chapter, may investigate and report upon the method or system of performing the duties of such nonprofit corporation." (*emphasis added*)

## **METHOD**

The Grand Jury gathered the information for this report from interviews with the executive directors of the Women's Shelter Program of San Luis Obispo County and the North County Women's Shelter Program. These meetings provided an understanding of the needs of victims of violence and the way the women's shelter programs help individuals and families insure their safety and regain their self-confidence. In addition, the Grand Jury invited the volunteer coordinator of the San Luis Obispo program to present a video tape describing the work of the shelter.

## **NARRATIVE**

There are two non-profit agencies in San Luis Obispo County providing temporary shelters for women and their children who are victims of domestic violence. The Women's Shelter of San Luis Obispo County serves both the City of San Luis Obispo and south county, and the North County Women's Shelter and Resource Center serves the needs of victims in north county communities.

The San Luis Obispo Women's Shelter Program is a United Way partner agency: Fifty-one percent of their funding is community-based, with additional funding from public and private grants. Their paid staff includes an executive director, and a volunteer coordinator who supervises 19 volunteers who have completed 40 hours of training. The location of a shelter house is kept confidential to protect its residents from those who have threatened to harm them.

The North County Women's Shelter and Resource Center operates two safe houses, employs nine full-time workers, and 21 part-time counselors and therapists. Frequently, both agencies work together to insure client access to available emergency shelter and other services on a short-term basis. If families need longer-term accommodations, they can move into transitional housing for six months to two years at a reasonable rate.

## Services:

Both of these agencies are private non-profit organizations that have contracts with the county Department of Social Services and receive referrals from them and from local law enforcement agencies as needed. The services of these two agencies address a variety of essential needs:

1. **Emergency response hotline** provides access to trained paid staff and/or volunteers who are available 24/7 for crisis counseling, emergency referrals to hospitals, law enforcement, assistance with filing restraining order, and/or emergency shelter.
2. **Room and board for victims** at a secure shelter is available for a limited time (60-90 days). Residents agree to participate in comprehensive programs of individual and group counseling, parenting classes, case management, and advocacy.
3. **Children's classes** are available to teach children how to keep themselves safe, how to manage their own anger, and how to develop healthy, non-violent relationships with peers, neighbors and family members.
4. **Counseling for perpetrators** is available in "Men Helping Men", a program designed to help abusers learn anger management, communication, and parenting skills. This program, which is not associated with either shelter, is often court-mandated.
5. **Legal Assistance** is provided for the completion and filing of Temporary Restraining Orders. A knowledgeable staff member or volunteer may accompany the victim to a court hearing. Victim Witness Assistance is also available to the victims to help them obtain compensation for assault-related injuries and damages due to emotional stress.
6. **Community Outreach Speakers** visit citizens' groups, schools, and other public agencies in an effort to increase awareness about the seriousness of domestic violence and the availability of support services. Classes on dating violence prevention are offered to schools and youth groups.

7. **Transportation** is available to help victims get to medical appointments, court hearings, and job interviews.
8. **Centro de Paz** is an organization that hosts bilingual and bicultural services, which reach out to the Latina community.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Grand Jury commends the Women's Shelter Program of San Luis Obispo County and the North County Women's Shelter and Resource Center for the important services they provide to victims of domestic violence. Recently, the Grand Jury has learned that since the early 1990's a consortium of county mental health and faith-based groups, along with the District Attorney's office, has been working with the women's shelters on a task force: Domestic Violence Prevention Enhancement and Leadership Through Alliance (DELTA). This group, recently funded by the Centers for Disease Control, includes a domestic violence prevention program with a media campaign targeting men and boys age 18 to 34. Domestic Violence Awareness Month is an annual event each October.

San Luis Obispo County is fortunate to have comprehensive, community-supported programs for victims of domestic violence.

### **REQUIRED RESPONSE**

This is an informational report. No response is necessary.